

## Bossen Bouwerie

GREENWICH VILLAGE WAS A ZONE OF ROGUES AND OUTCASTS from the start.

In 1640 the population of New Amsterdam, a rough outpost of the Dutch West India Company, was fewer than five hundred people, but it was astonishingly diverse, “the motliest assortment of souls in Christendom,” including Dutch and Walloons, French, Swedish, English, Germans, “one Cicero Alberto (known around town as ‘the Italian’),” and a Muslim mulatto. The first Jews would arrive in 1654. Predominantly male, more employee than citizen, the residents were tough, contentious, and often drunk—drinking and whoring were the chief entertainments, and taverns occupied a quarter of the town’s buildings. New York’s enduring reputation as a wide-open party town goes back to its founding.

Today’s Bowery follows the original track that ran out from the small settlement at the southern tip of Manhattan to *bouweries* (farms) like Peter Stuyvesant’s on the east side. It remained an unpaved and lonely country turnpike into the nineteenth century. On the west side, roughly two miles north of town, was an area the Dutch called Noortwyck. It was

a mix of marshland, meadow, swamp, and woods, punctuated by a few hills, its soil sandy and loamy. Through it wandered a trout stream the natives called Minetta (Spirit Water), which to the Dutch became Mintje Kill (Little Stream), to the English Minetta Brook. It wound a path down through then-swampy Washington Square and took a downward diagonal to the Hudson.

Wouter Van Twiller, who succeeded Peter Minuit as director-general of the Dutch settlement in 1633 (Minuit “bought” Manhattan from the natives in 1626), was not a very diligent leader of the colony but he did do well for himself in the new world. Taking advantage of the great distance separating him from his bosses in Europe, he appropriated for his personal use two hundred acres of land in Noortwyck that Minuit had mapped out as a future company farm. Van Twiller turned it into a tobacco plantation he named Bossen Bouwerie (Farm in the Woods). His farmhouse is thought to have been the first built in the area. Late in the 1630s he transferred two parcels of the plantation to Jan Van Rotterdam and Francis Lastley; the lane that ran between their farms would eventually come to be known as Christopher Street, the oldest street in the area.

So fair claim can be made for Van Twiller, Van Rotterdam, and Lastley as the first European residents of what later became Greenwich Village. They weren’t there alone. A native settlement called Saponckanican lay near the intersection of today’s Gansevoort and Washington Streets. Gansevoort Street is believed to be laid out along the native trail to the settlement, which was evidently abandoned in the 1660s, though for the rest of the century European settlers continued to use the name Saponckanican for their own hamlet that grew up on the spot.

In 1644 the first black residents moved into the area, when New Amsterdam granted some of its slaves their “half-freedom” to grow food for themselves and for the colonists on mostly tiny parcels of land between today’s Houston and Christopher Streets. Among them, the former slaves Domingo Anthony, who farmed a plot at the southwest corner of today’s Washington Square Park, and Paul d’Angola, who worked a lot between Minetta Lane and Thompson Street. A lane that followed the banks of

the Minetta Brook and connected the farms was called the Negroes' Causeway in colonial times. It is today's Minetta Street.

Other so-called free negro lots were drizzled throughout present-day Chinatown, Soho, and the East Village. The Dutch were not acting out of altruism or good fellowship. Spread across the island, the black farms were intended to act as a defensive barrier and buffer zone between the town and the Lenape, the area's native population, who had been roused to fury by Willem Kieft, New Netherland's director-general from 1638 to 1647. Hardheaded, tyrannical, and bloody-minded, Kieft had angered the natives by trying to levy taxes against them. Violence ensued. Kieft decided stern punishment was the only way to bring the unruly natives in line. In February 1643 he led raids on two of their villages, one north of the town (near the eastern end of the present Grand Street) and one across the river in New Jersey. Kieft and his cohort massacred some 120 men, women, and children, triumphantly dragging mutilated bodies and severed heads back to town. "Young children, some of them snatched from their mothers, were cut in pieces before the eyes of their parents, and the pieces were thrown into the fire or into the water," a shocked townsman reported. "Other babes were bound on planks and then cut through, stabbed and miserably massacred so that it would break a heart of stone." The atrocities ignited a disastrous war that flared from New Jersey to Long Island. A few thousand natives died, many outlying farms were burned and abandoned, and New Amsterdam was brought close to ruin by the time the conflict ended. Kieft was recalled and Peter Stuyvesant was brought in to restore order and rebuild.

In 1664 British warships sailed up to New Amsterdam and took it from Stuyvesant without a shot fired, renaming it New York. (The Dutch took it back in 1673 and renamed it New Orange but relinquished it again, and for good, in a year.) At first, English colonial law continued to allow black freemen to own land, and free blacks purchased sometimes significant parcels of land through the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, the English gradually tightened the reins on black slaves, requiring them to carry passes, levying heavy punishments on escaped slaves and anyone

harboring them, and establishing, in 1702, the office of a Common Whipper of Slaves. A new slave market opened on Wall Street in 1711. The following year, a group of up to fifty black men and women “carrying guns, swords, knives, and hatchets” staged a rebellion, setting fire to a building on Maiden Lane (then on the outskirts of the city), killing or wounding some fifteen whites who rushed to put it out, including a few of their masters. Of those captured, “twenty were hanged and three burned at the stake. One, a pregnant woman, had her execution postponed” until after she gave birth. The incident was an excuse for a harsh new “Act for preventing Suppressing and punishing the Conspiracy and Insurrection of Negroes and other Slaves.” This included a new prohibition against free blacks, mulattoes, or natives owning “any Houses, Lands, Tenements or Hereditaries.” As a result, by the Revolutionary War most of the former Negro lots in Greenwich Village were in white hands.

UNDER THE ENGLISH, COLONIAL NEW YORK DEVELOPED FROM A frontier trading post into a port city. By 1700 its population was around five thousand, ten times that of 1640. It had expanded north almost to Fulton Street, packing in hundreds of new buildings on streets that were being paved with cobblestones. The decrepit defensive battlement at Wall Street was pulled down to make way for northward growth, although there wasn’t much at first. The stone Great Dock was constructed on the East River in 1675, landfill widened the tip of the island all around, and stone bulkheads protected the new shoreline, which soon bristled with wharfs. The city grew and prospered through the first half of the 1700s, powered by shipping, riding boom markets in commodities such as sugar and slaves. By 1740 one in five New Yorkers was a slave. The city’s numbers also swelled with new immigrants: Germans, Irish and Scots, many of them indentured (in effect, white slaves), and Jews.

The war of independence brought seven years of dislocation and disaster. Occupied by the British in 1776, the city was set alight, likely by Patriot saboteurs. After the British withdrawal on November 25, 1783, the burned-out zone west of Broadway was cleared for new construction. Wharfs that had deteriorated during the occupation were rebuilt, ship-

yards bloomed. Existing streets were paved and graded, new ones laid out. A flood tide of new immigrants brought the population to more than 120,000 by 1820.

For all its growth and busyness, however, the city was still packed tightly into a very small area at the tip of Manhattan. You could easily walk anywhere, as long as you minded the odd open sewer trench or the filled-in swamp where the ground was soft and still settling. A new housing development proposed in 1806 for up near the canal that ran west from the Collect Pond to the Hudson—filled in a decade later to form Canal Street—failed because nobody wanted to live “so far out of town.” In his *Reminiscences of New York by an Octogenarian* published in 1896, the civil engineer Charles Haynes Haswell remembered that “As late as 1820 I, in company with an elder relative, occasionally practised pistol-shooting at a target on a fence on the south side in this open and unfrequented street.” He also remembered hunting snipe on Lispenard’s Meadow, south of the present Broome Street. When the new City Hall opened in 1812, three sides of the exterior were marble, but the north face was cheaper brownstone because there wasn’t much of anyone north of Chambers Street to impress.

Still, some New Yorkers could already envision a much larger city. In 1811 the Commissioners of Streets and Roads in the City of New York published a map that planned for the Manhattan of the future. The commissioners’ plan, sometimes referred to as the Randel Plan for its chief engineer and surveyor, showed a rectilinear grid of numbered east-west streets and numbered and lettered north-south avenues imposing machinelike order from Houston Street all the way up to 155th Street. As with so much else in New York City’s history, real estate interests had top priority in the commissioners’ thoughts. In the report published with the map, they noted that “one of the first objects which claimed their attention was the form and manner in which the business should be conducted; that is to say, whether they should confine themselves to rectilinear and rectangular streets, or whether they should adopt some of those supposed improvements by circles, ovals, and stars, which certainly embellish a plan, whatever may be their effect as to convenience and utility.” (This is surely a disparaging ref-

erence to Pierre L'Enfant's more fanciful and, to this day, traffic-bedeaving plan for the new District of Columbia.) "In considering that subject they could not but bear in mind that a city is to be composed principally of the habitations of men, and that straight-sided and right-angled houses are the most cheap to build and the most convenient to live in. The effect of these plain and simple reflections was decisive."

From the day it was published the plan drew harsh criticism. Where were the utilitarian back alleys, the monotony-relieving plazas, the breathtaking hilltop vistas that befit a great city? "These are men who would have cut down the seven hills of Rome," one New Yorker griped in 1818. He was not far off; much of the once hilly island would be flattened as the grid marched inexorably uptown. In 1893 a *Harper's Monthly* writer complained:

The magnificent opportunity which was given to the Commissioners to create a beautiful city simply was wasted and thrown away. Having to deal with a region well wooded, broken by hills, and diversified by watercourses—where the very contours of the land suggested curving roads, and its unequal surface reservations for beauty's sake alone—these worthy men decided that the forests should be cut away, the hills levelled, the hollows filled in, the streams buried; and upon the flat surface thus created they clapped down a ruler and completed their Boeotian [i.e., dull-witted] programme by creating a city in which all was right angles and straight lines.

The writer summed up the plan as "a mere grind of money making in stupid commonplace ways."

One small area on the map bucked the precision-tooled order. Just above Houston Street on the Hudson flank of the island lay a maze of crooked, angled streets, a small eruption of eccentricity and disorder: the former Bossen Bouwerie, now called Greenwich Village.